

The following listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

Claim 1 (Previously presented): A method, comprising:

providing an apparatus having a distal portion and an expandable bladder coupled to the distal portion, the expandable bladder having surfaces configured to engage and spread apart adjacent vertebrae of a spine;

positioning a cannula to access the spine;

introducing the apparatus through the cannula such that at least a portion of the expandable bladder is positioned between the adjacent vertebrae; and

inflating the expandable bladder to spread the adjacent vertebrae apart.

Claim 2 (Original): The method of claim 1, further comprising operating between the adjacent vertebrae.

Claim 3 (Previously presented): The method of claim 2, the operating is performed while said expandable bladder is inflated.

Claim 4 (Previously presented): The method of claim 2, wherein the operating includes removing tissue from between the vertebrae.

Claim 5 (Previously presented): The method of claim 4, wherein the tissue removed includes the intervertebral disc.

Claims 6-7 (Canceled).

Claim 8 (Previously presented): The method of claim 1, wherein the expandable bladder, when inflated, has a shape selected from the group consisting of curved and wedge-shaped.

Claim 9 (Canceled).

Claim 10 (Previously presented): The method of claim 1, wherein the expandable bladder is spread and arranged for spreading apart the adjacent vertebrae.

Claim 11 (Previously presented): The method of claim 10, wherein the expandable bladder is sized and arranged for enabling removal of intervertebral tissue from between adjacent vertebrae.

Claim 12 (Canceled).

Claim 13 (Previously presented): The method of claim 1, wherein the expandable bladder is inflated at a pressure from 10 mmHg to 1000 mmHg.

Claim 14 (Canceled).

Claim 15 (Previously presented): The method of claim 1, wherein the expandable bladder is inflated without unconfined fluid introduced to the joint.

Claim 16 (Original): The method of claim 1, further comprising introducing instruments between said adjacent vertebrae to perform an operation.

Claim 17 (Previously presented): The method of claim 1, wherein the introducing includes manipulating a rigid shaft having the bladder at an end thereof.

Claim 18 (Previously presented): The method of claim 1, wherein introducing includes manipulating a flexible shaft having the bladder at an end thereof.

Claim 19 (Previously presented): The method of claim 1, wherein the expandable bladder comprises a polymeric material.

Claim 20 (Previously presented): A method, comprising:

positioning a cannula to access a spine;

providing an apparatus having a distal portion and an expandable bladder coupled to the distal portion, the expandable bladder having surfaces configured to spread apart adjacent vertebrae of the spine;

introducing the apparatus through the cannula to access a space between the adjacent vertebrae;

positioning the expandable bladder between the adjacent vertebrae;

inflating the expandable bladder to spread the adjacent vertebrae apart; and

operating on the spine using an instrument introduced between the expanded vertebrae.

Claim 21 (Previously presented): The method of claim 20, wherein the operating is performed while said expandable bladder is inflated.

Claim 22 (Previously presented): The method of claim 21, wherein the operating includes removing tissue from between the vertebrae.

Claim 23 (Previously presented): The method of claim 22, wherein the tissue includes at least a portion of an intervertebral disc.

Claim 24 (Canceled).

Claim 25 (Previously presented): The method of claim 20, further comprising deflating said expandable bladder and removing the expandable bladder from the spine.

Claim 26 (Previously presented): The method of claim 20, wherein the expandable bladder is disposed at the distalmost end of the apparatus.

Claim 27 (Previously presented): A method, comprising:

positioning a cannula to access a spine;

providing an apparatus having an expandable bladder, the expandable bladder having surfaces configured to engage and spread apart adjacent vertebrae of the spine;

introducing at least a portion of the apparatus that includes the expandable bladder through the cannula to access the adjacent vertebrae;

positioning the expandable bladder between the adjacent vertebrae; and
inflating the expandable bladder to spread the adjacent vertebrae apart.

Claim 28 (Previously presented): The method of claim 27, wherein the expandable bladder includes a stretchable material so that the expandable bladder at least partially collapses when deflated.

Claim 29 (Previously presented): The method of claim 27, wherein the expandable bladder includes a material that does not substantially stretch.

Claim 30 (Previously presented): The method of claim 27, wherein inflating the expandable bladder pushes soft tissue out of the way.

Claim 31 (Previously presented): The method of claim 27, further comprising introducing at least one instrument between the adjacent vertebrae and operating between the adjacent vertebrae with the at least one instrument.

Claim 32 (Previously presented): The method of claim 31, further comprising operating between the adjacent vertebrae while said expandable bladder is inflated.

Claim 33 (Previously presented): The method of claim 31, wherein the operating includes removing tissue from between the vertebrae.

Claim 34 (Previously presented): The method of claim 33, wherein the tissue includes at least a portion of the intervertebral disc.

Claim 35 (Previously presented): The method of claim 33, wherein the expandable bladder remains inflated while the instrument is introduced to perform the operation.

Claim 36 (Previously presented): The method of claim 33, wherein the expandable bladder is removed prior to or while the instrument is introduced to perform the operation.

Claim 37 (Previously presented): The method of claim 31, further comprising contracting the expandable bladder; and removing the apparatus from the spine.

Claims 38-101 (Canceled).

Claim 102 (Previously presented): The method of claim 1, wherein the apparatus further comprises an open proximal end and an open distal end defining an inflation lumen therethrough, and the expandable bladder is in fluid communication with the inflation lumen.

Claim 103 (Previously presented): The method of claim 27, wherein the apparatus further comprises an open proximal end and an open distal end defining an inflation lumen therethrough, and the expandable bladder is in fluid communication with the inflation lumen.

Claim 104 (Canceled).